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Trying to Save a Quiet Place on Staten Island

By **Lisa W. Foderaro**

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For more than a century, rich and poor Catholics alike came to Mount Manresa, a Jesuit retreat center on Staten Island a mile from the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. From bricklayers to lawyers, from the poet Joyce Kilmer to Malcolm Wilson, the former New York governor, they stepped out of the workaday world and entered a silent space of prayer and meditation.

Mount Manresa was the first retreat for laymen in the United States. But it was also a vital resource for the Fort Wadsworth neighborhood of Staten Island. Residents, many of them Catholic, were allowed to explore the 15 acres, whether the meditation garden or a grove of white oaks and tulip trees or the impressive grotto dating from the mid-19th century.

So when the New York Province of the Society of Jesus, known as the Jesuits, announced last year that it was selling the property to a developer of shopping malls and townhouse neighborhoods, area residents and Roman Catholics reacted.

For months, the Committee to Save Mount Manresa appealed to elected officials. It petitioned the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission. It tried to block the sale through litigation. It held weekly demonstrations. It even appealed to Pope Francis, a Jesuit.

But in mid-February, the \$15 million sale to Savo Brothers, which plans to build 250 townhouses on the site, went through. The week before Easter, after a judge lifted a temporary order blocking work on the site, crews arrived. In three days, men with chain saws toppled scores of towering trees — a black tupelo was believed to be 400 years old — as protesters shrieked.

Lucille De Ross, a homemaker whose street borders the back of the property, was there to support her neighbor Hanna Charubin, whose house abuts the retreat center. Mrs. De Ross said that as a girl she sledded on the hilly site. Each of her five children and 11 grandchildren played amid the rhododendrons and religious statues.

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“They came in here the day before Holy Thursday and started cutting,” Mrs. De Ross said. “Hanna was screaming and I was crying. I’m here all my life, and my parents and grandparents. We all know Mount Manresa. When you grow up someplace like we did and you see it torn apart like this, it’s heartbreaking.”



Trees were cut down this month in Mount Manresa, a former Jesuit retreat campus.

Brian Harkin for The New York Times

Mount Manresa was originally the home of Louis H. Meyer, a Staten Island banker, who bought 20 acres of wooded hillside and built a 20-bedroom villa with views of New York Harbor and a grotto where Shakespearean plays were performed. But after he and his wife died, the property ended up as a boardinghouse. In 1911, the Jesuits bought it as a retreat center and erected lodgings and a chapel. The villa was torn down in the 1960s.

The New York Province, which covers all of New York State and northern New Jersey, said it was forced to sell after years of declining retreat activity. The decision, officials said, was less about money and more about refocusing its ministry for a changing world.

“An increasing number of Hispanics and other younger Catholics in the New York area did not find the residential-type retreat experience what they were looking for,” said the Rev. Vincent Cooke, a Jesuit spokesman. “We are making a strategic decision. Prayer and meditation can take place anywhere, and a special house is not an essential element.”

In addition to selling Mount Manresa, the New York Province sold off a retreat house in Manhasset, on Long Island — a Gatsby-era, 87-room mansion, called Inisfada — for \$36.5 million. The Jesuits kept a retreat in Morristown, N.J., where the buildings were in better shape.

Staffing the three retreat centers had become a challenge. Since the 1950s, the number of Jesuit priests, seminarians and brothers in the New York Province has fallen to 300 from 1,500.

Some experts say the economics of Jesuit retreat centers, which have also closed elsewhere, no longer make sense. “The real problem is cost,” said the Rev. Thomas J. Reese, a Jesuit priest and a senior analyst for The National Catholic Reporter, a

newspaper. "They still tell people that for a weekend retreat they can give \$100. Well, you can't get a hotel room, let alone a retreat, for that. They don't charge enough."

About \$10 million from the Mount Manresa sale will go toward a new fund to support the ministry of the so-called Spiritual Exercises in the New York Province, Father Cooke said. The Spiritual Exercises were prayers and meditations developed by the founder of the Jesuits, St. Ignatius Loyola, in the 1500s.

Opponents of Mount Manresa's sale say they feel cheated by both the Jesuits and the developer. Diane J. Savino, a Democratic state senator who lives around the corner from the retreat, said the Jesuits, who announced their intention to sell in mid-2012, had not given officials enough notice before signing a contract with Savo Brothers.

Lawmakers might have arranged for a sale to a nonprofit to save the land and historic buildings, she said. Or money could have been raised to preserve the property as parkland.



Bill Winter placed flowers in the construction fence. Brian Harkin for The New York Times

Ms. Savino and Assemblywoman Nicole Malliotakis, a Republican who also represents the area, appealed to the state attorney general, Eric T. Schneiderman, who must sign off on the sale of property by a nonprofit. The lawmakers said that even after they had decided to sell the property, the Jesuits continued to raise money for Mount Manresa, under the name "the Second Century Campaign," a rubric that had been created to mark the retreat's centennial in 2011. Some people complained that the name falsely implied that the retreat would be around for another century.

Mr. Schneiderman, a Democrat, originally said he had no objection to the sale. He changed his mind after the elected officials appealed to him. But when the Jesuits agreed to create a \$200,000 escrow account to repay donors who felt that they had been

deceived, he allowed the sale to go through. Father Cooke said that using the Second Century Campaign designation had been “simply an honest mistake.”

Ms. Savino said: “We did everything we could. We attempted to have this landmarked three times, and three times the Preservation Commission turned us down.”

The decimation of trees during Holy Week was a particular blow, she said. “They picked the trees that were most visible,” she said. “It was psychological warfare. These guys have been on Staten Island a long time and they really don’t care about anything other than the profit they’ll make off this property.”

Savo Brothers, which did not respond to requests for comment, has refused to enter negotiations.

In 2001, another fight to save a piece of Catholic heritage on Staten Island ended in defeat when a developer bulldozed the modest cottage that had belonged to Dorothy Day, a founder of the Catholic Worker movement and now a candidate for sainthood. The demolition occurred just days before the city’s Landmarks Preservation Commission was to formally nominate the site for historic preservation.

Though discouraged, members of the Committee to Save Mount Manresa have not given up hope. The state’s Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, in response to an appeal by the committee, wrote a letter stating that Mount Manresa was eligible for consideration for the National Register of Historic Places. The committee hopes that such eligibility will lead to an environmental review that could reduce the number of units.

Jack Bolembach, president of the committee, said he believed that the retreat center’s terrain had never been farmed or leveled. “This was open for 102 years and has all the makings of a perfect park,” he said. “It’s one of the rare places in New York City that is still natural.”

For others, Mount Manresa’s role in the aftermath of Sept. 11 makes it worth preserving. Sister Maureen Skelly, a staff member at the retreat house and a Police Department chaplain, consoled emergency workers at ground zero. Mount Manresa’s director at the time, the Rev. John Ryan, said the final prayer at the Fresh Kills landfill, where rubble had been sifted for victims’ remains.

Joseph G. Canepa, a real estate broker and a lawyer who had gone on a dozen retreats at Mount Manresa, noted that the retreat house opened on Sept. 11, 1911, exactly 90 years before the terrorist attacks. “They can destroy the buildings and knock down the trees,” he said. “But the ground itself is sacred.”

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